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## ABSTRACT

The necessity for maintaining and extending the public space within which argumentation may appear, whether or not represented in the classroom, stems largely from pressures which have increasingly restricted that space. To function as public spaces, classrooms must enable students as citizens to confer in an unrestricted fashion about matters of public interest. Pressures such as specialization make the functioning of the classroom as a public space more problematic. For example, science courses tend to treat opinion as irrelevant. Furthermore, some reluctance to entertain popular opinions has been noted in the teaching of many academic disciplines. If students can be viewed as possessing public power, the classroom can be employed as a public space. A broader view of the "classroom" as including the entire educational environment and its inhabitants would have some potential for contributing to the public sphere. School forensics program should be able to find a place for real talk which contributes to public opinion. The classroom may well be free enough for the exchange of public opinion so that the implementation of its public function may be a worthy goal for all educators. (Fifteen references are attached.) (SG)

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THE CLASSROOM AS PUBLIC SPACE

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In a recent essay Israeli educationist Haim Gordon bluntly asserted, "The educator for democracy cannot create a public space in the classroom" (55). He insisted, "Such a space, or anything similar to it, cannot come into being in the classroom" (56).

The claim that the classroom cannot constitute public space demands examination if for no other reason than the public sphere is under such well-recognized stress that it needs all the help it can get. The "degeneration of the public sphere" has become a commonplace (Rodger), and efforts to resuscitate it are in their early stages at best. Thus any impulse to strike the educational environment from among the potential candidates as public space calls for careful scrutiny.

Definitions of the public space (or public sphere, public realm, public forum) concept have their abundant permutations and combinations, and they are no doubt subject to the ideological agendas of the individuals setting them forth. Almost universally the public sphere is distinguished from the "private" sphere, and after that sometimes from the institutional sphere, depending on who is carving up the "space."

A popular and useful definition of the public sphere is the one provided by Jurgen Habermas: "A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion may be formed." The public sphere provides the opportunity for the Habermas version of competent communication to take place: "Citizens behave as a

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public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion--that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express their opinions--about matters of general interest" (49). Leaving aside some additional particularities expressed by Habermas, we can see the potential for a fit between classroom activity and public sphere activity.

The necessity for maintaining and extending the public space within which argumentation may appear, whether or not represented in the classroom, stems largely from the severe pressures which have increasingly restricted that space. Four such pressures stand out. (1) Claims of expertise or science insist that most significant decisions are too technical for ordinary citizens to understand. (2) The "private" sphere has been extended so far that many erstwhile public activities, even those of giant corporations, are regarded as of nobody's business but their own. (3) The administrative or bureaucratic sphere continues to expand and absorb into formal regulatory routine matters which might well be subject to open dispute. (4) The perennial influence of money, of armies, and other manifestations of "power" make the influence of public opinion minuscule in many situations. Resistance to these imposing forces constitutes no small part of work of the preservationists of the public realm.

Can we establish or re-establish some such space in the classroom? Do the classrooms of the university, and for that matter of primary and secondary schools, have the potential to provide a segment of the public sphere, where "something approaching public opinion may be formed?"



In order to generate some perceptions with regard to the nature of their classrooms as public spaces, I asked several dozen students to respond to this question: "Are classrooms for real? Are they places where real public opinion can be formed or are they artificial practice environments?" Of the 39 who replied, 22 were of the opinion that classrooms did constitute public space, eight had substantial reservations, and nine believed their classrooms were not real. The grounds which they expressed to support their positions will be used only for illustrative purposes in exploring the fit between public space and educational classrooms.

In order to factor out the features which classrooms must exhibit if they are to function as public space, we may return to the Habermas description of that space, where citizens "confer in an unrestricted fashion. . . about matters of public interest." The three central components of this description may be identified as (1) to confer, (2) in an unrestricted fashion, and (3) about matters of public interest. These features--meaningful debate, free expression, and general interests--are quite generally discoverable in other descriptions of the public realm. For instance, Parekh (82) derives this view from Hannah Arendt's work: "In Arendt's view, public space presupposes three essential conditions of existence, namely human plurality, speech and public objects." Gerard Hauser says, "as I use the expression, it refers to a discursive realm in which individuals and groups may transcend their private concerns to interact freely in ways conducive to forming a common sense of reality" (438). Likewise,



Zarefsky's public forum represents "a space for collective deliberation and decisions about matters affecting the public weal" (181). And for a final example, Oestereicher defines the public sphere as "the terrain upon which legally free and equal individuals engage each other in rational debate concerning public issues and governmental decisions" (1004). There is no need, then, to take the word "space" too literally, so long as the conditions of communication, of freedom, and of common concerns are maintained.

Thus we will explore the strengths and weaknesses of the classroom in these three dimensions, with some reference to the student perceptions discovered in our survey.

#### **Where Citizens Confer**

Public space is hardly meaningful if communication does not take place within it. If "something like public opinion" is to be formed, the occupants of the public space must share and challenge the assumptions and propositions which are introduced therein.

It is not enough to be free to express an opinion without coercion. One must actually express the opinion. "Individuals engage each other in rational debate." Thus both the theories and practice of argumentation are vital factors in the establishment and maintenance of the public sphere. Again Parekh paraphrases Arendt: "Public space presupposes speech or language, a term which Arendt uses in its original Greek sense of logos or reasoned and articulate communication. . . . Speech can take many forms such as debate, discussion, nonpurposive exchange of



opinions and conversation" (93).

The classroom where skills of thinking and expression are especially valued would seem to be an appropriate locale for both learning and utilizing those principles of argumentative communication. Observed one student respondent: "Most classes are places which induce the exchange of ideas. Classrooms are places where real public opinion is formed because of the multitude of different ideas which are being discussed, analyzed and interpreted."

A necessary characteristic of the public sphere is that sufficient differences exist among those persons participating that a genuine examination of ideas and values may take place, as suggested by the Arendt criterion of "human plurality." This feature is also suggested in Goodnight's insistence that "controversy" is an inherent feature of public space (1987). If persons are so alike, perhaps because of the cultural imperatives they face or because of the institutional roles they play, that they do not have differences in outlook, then no "space" exists between them.

Some students do see a certain amount of such space existing in the classroom. Says one, "The classroom provides a group of people with different cultural upbringings who may all express different opinions."

It is possible to object that students are relatively young and do not bring enough to the classroom to count, although that may also mean that they are free to have and express differences. Some educational institutions are painfully homogeneous, and all



students are part of a culture which constrains variety to some extent. "Classrooms can be very real," adds another student, "but that can only occur when students and teachers throw their inhibitions to the winds and truly begin to communicate."

And it may be that the classroom is an especially good place for public communication, since information is a mainstay of education: "Students in a class prepare and study in much greater detail than someone in the street. With the extra information they possess the opinions they present will have more weight and logic behind them. In this way the classroom is an information enhanced environment for public opinion."

Insofar as debate, discussion, and exchange of grounded opinions are characteristic of at least some classrooms, the ideal of public realm discourse within them does not seem to be impossible.

#### **In An Unrestricted Fashion**

By every definition, the public space is one in which freedom of expression is maintained. Again, the classroom has as much chance to be such an arena as any in society. While having the courage of one's convictions is never an easy task, a classroom environment may provide fewer sanctions against such expression than many others in society.

For one thing, academic freedom, however precarious in practice, is established as a concept based upon the recognition that all points of view should be subject to scrutiny and that the university has a special responsibility to entertain and examine all manner of ideas. Society has a substantial stake in



preserving academic freedom for its own sake, and the schools are given special obligations to maintain it.

To the degree that academic freedom exists in practical fact, the classroom should provide a relatively unhampered opportunity to speak openly. Students see that as an ideal: "There must not be any limits as to what opinions may be expressed and people must have the opportunity to express contradictions." One perhaps overly-sanguine student declared, "Teachers enjoy being contradicted because it shows that the students care. . . . "

Pragmatic limitations on expression do in fact exist, of course, in many instances. Observed one student, "The entire makeup of a class, students and teachers, inhibits real public opinion from being formed." Teachers as authority figures with disciplinary powers and grades to use as rewards may occasion considerable caution or distortion in the presentation of views. The power of peer pressure is also exceptionally formidable in educational environments. One respondent complained: "They don't disagree with the teacher's ideas because they fear the teacher will dislike them and their grade will be affected. Or often students don't say their weird ideas for fear that other students will think they are weird. They conform and try to be just like everybody else."

At times even institutional pressures, or sectarian objectives, may be reflected in the classroom as limitations of expression, as we try to deal with "the inherent awkwardness of institutionalized inquiry" (Brann, 144). Still, as a realm of



discourse the public sphere has never been antiseptically clear of personalities, politics, or power plays. In seeing the whole picture: "Public opinion means the public as a whole, but some of the public does seem to be influenced, intimidated, or apathetic on some issues. I think to a certain extent that holds true in the classroom situation. Overall, classrooms are real."

We cannot ignore all kinds of pressures inside the classroom or outside, but it would appear that these pressures are no worse in school than elsewhere and that the ideal of academic freedom makes openness more than possible therein.

#### **About Matters of General Interest**

Any definition of the public sphere rests upon the assumption that matters exist which are of concern to many persons, or perhaps to everyone, in a society. These are the matters of general concern, the public objects, or public issues which are characteristic of public space.

It would be hard to think of an academic discipline which does not address issues which are, or ought to be, "matters of general interest." Most notably, the social sciences and the humanities should reflect concerns which go beyond the narrow particularities of their subject matter. Though our immediate model may be an argumentation course, where all of the topics are of general concern, we all know of history, philosophy, sociology, literature, and science courses where public implications of a relatively universal nature are explored. These implications may include not only ways and means, war and peace, and the like, but the whole system of values, social



practices, institutions, and "the common sense of reality."

Thus matters of general interest need not be limited to political issues. Habermas has distinguished, for instance, a "literary" public sphere, a realm of aesthetics where public judgments are significant and where opinion may be derived from the classroom as easily as from the drawing room.

One student saw the opportunity in these terms: "Colleges and universities are places of learning more than facts and information. They're a place where individuals should analyze and question the world around them."

The identification of the classroom as a public space is made a good deal more problematic, however, by certain pressures upon it, most notably that of specialization. Specialization, as has been noted earlier, tends to take matters beyond the realm of general interest into areas of a particularized competence. Even where the public might have a legitimate stake, the disciplinary vision is that of an expertise which cannot be understood or explained in ways which are accessible to public treatment.

Science courses in particular characteristically follow an objectivist rationale which treats opinions and preferences as irrelevant. Whenever the name of science is invoked, the role of the public realm will have to be examined carefully.

Furthermore, some reluctance to entertain popular opinions, experiences, or feelings has been noted in the teaching of many academic disciplines (Weiss). Where education is envisioned as an entirely elitist operation not accessible to the expression of public concerns, the public realm is automatically excluded and



becomes irrelevant.

Still, the opportunity exists, and is susceptible to expansion, operationally and philosophically, for treating the classroom as a locale for examination and inquiry respecting matters of general interest, and thus constituting a form of public space.

### **Real Changes**

Additionally, the expression of "their opinions" means that individual ideas are being explored, evaluated, and adopted within the classroom. Real changes take place. These are not workbook exercises, but personal choices with regard to values and policies. Made in a social and communicative context, they are a step in the direction of the formation of public opinion. Said one student, "The classroom is as real as any other situation. Classes definitely correspond to regular everyday life, or students could not form any opinions 'for real' for 16 years of school."

### **Empowerment**

Now let us return to Gordon's original claim that educators cannot create a public space, "or anything similar to it," in the classroom. He warrants this claim by insisting that "responsibility" is a requisite feature of public space activity. Gordon insists: "The classroom is a place of learning--the pupils cannot assume responsibility for the principles governing their life in the classroom, since the teacher and administration assume that responsibility" (56). Responsibility in the public realm means making decisions with other persons regarding the



ways in which their lives together will be managed. Thus words are reflected in action, and "playing" at responsibility is meaningless. Adds Gordon, "Furthermore, a person cannot play at taking this responsibility--either one assumes full responsibility for one's words and deeds, or one does not" (56).

The position has roots in Arendt's disengagement of the public and educational spheres: "We must decisively divorce the realm of education. . . from the realm of public, political life: (195). Both Gordon and Arendt are distraught at progressive education, the "various advocates of open education," and, no doubt, the Deweyesque thrust of the present essay (Arendt 178; Gordon 56).

To reject this disengagement is to reexamine the matter of responsibility. May students in educational institutions, under the authority of teacher and administration, engage in discourse and even make decisions which are responsible and have social impact?

One response would be to note that on the larger scene young people are invited, even required, to take full roles in public affairs. Many of them can vote, they can engage in political advocacy, attend and participate in public meetings, rallies, and demonstrations, write letters to the papers, exerting influence in ways which are not at all a matter of play. Although teachers or administrators may "govern" life in the classroom, they do not govern the total life of the individual. They're not all young people, either. Recent census figures show well over half of U.S. college students as more than 22 years old. The picture of



classrooms inhabited by "pre-political" students may be problematic in many institutions as education becomes a lifetime enterprise, and increasingly mature and responsible citizens are found therein.

Nevertheless, both the critique of the decline of authority in education and the vision of the classroom as preparatory are serious arguments, and may impinge upon the notion of the classroom as public space.

The basic issue seems to be one of empowerment. If the individuals who are enrolled in classrooms are powerless in society, then their messages to one another will have no public impact. Some would call communication meaningless when not addressed to those who have power to act. If we can see students as possessing public power, then the classroom may be employed as public space. If not, then not.

### **The Extended Classroom**

An additional consideration results from extensions of the definition of a "classroom." As one extension, in our society, "classes" are frequently sponsored by libraries, churches, labor unions, business and professional organizations, and even by private individuals, outside the aegis of formal academic institutions. Certainly some of the activity of such classrooms may contribute to the discourse of the public sphere; indeed, in some cases their primary aim and objective is a contribution to good citizenship.

Furthermore, the general environment of the more formal educational institution, consisting of individuals and



organizational structures whose purpose is education, may serve on the whole as an extended classroom, a public space. Not all of the talk on a campus takes place in formal classes. A physical environment consisting of dormitories, auditoriums, libraries, and a variety of watering holes, inhabited by at least a core of individuals with aspirations, concerns, and inquiring minds, would have some potential for contributing to the public sphere, and as a matter of fact actually does so.

And finally, it must go without saying that the forensics program, where matters of general interest are the warp and woof of the enterprise, should be able to find a place for real talk, real influence, and a contribution toward "something approaching public opinion." Forensics is a classroom. One could hope for a growing recognition that this forensics "classroom," above all, can be treated as constituting a part of the larger public sphere. "It is important," as Hollihan and Riley declared two years ago, "to abandon the notion that debates are not 'real,' or that they are merely rehearsals for arguments students might encounter in later life" (402). To cite Lentericchia's aphorism (quoted by Balthrop, 28), "That inside/outside distinction is killing us." Even as academic debate now stands, the participants are deeply influenced by the embedded practices of the activity and, as Hollihan and Riley further suggest, attitudinal, behavioral, and programmatic changes may well be explored as debate is seen as participating in the public sphere.

James Klumpp extended the implications of a public orientation in describing his "vision in which debate does far



more than facilitate decision making. It facilitates the public realm. It integrates the making of decisions with our sense of ourselves and our community" (397). The intersection of ourselves and our community is the locale of the public sphere.

Before concluding, we would not want to misrepresent the thrust of the Gordon essay cited earlier. Gordon, while explicitly discounting the classroom, associates himself with Hannah Arendt in advocating the teaching of "thinking," in being wary of mere decision making or problem solving, and encouraging confrontation. Most of what he says would be congruent with education directed at active citizenship.

Reviewing Gordon's original assertion, however, that the classroom cannot constitute public space, we maintain that the matter is hardly closed. The classroom, including forensics education, may well be a place where citizens confer. It may be free enough for real opinions to be shared. And certainly matters of general interest can find their way into any classroom. To preserve and extend the public space, all concerned may need to enhance these features of the educational enterprise.

Philosophical objections may be raised and practical limitations may persist, but the classroom is not absolutely and necessarily excluded from the public sphere, and the implementation of its public function may be a worthy goal for all educators, including those in forensics and communication.



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